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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, JANUARY 10-16

¶1. The following is the first in a new series of weekly cables from Embassy Astana with tidbits on daily life in Kazakhstan.

MASIMOV JOINS BLOGOSPHERE

¶2. Prime Minister Karim Masimov has joined the Kazakhstani blogosphere by starting his very own weblog ("primeminister.government.kz"). In a bid to connect with the people -- or at least those 14 percent who have Internet access -- Masimov started "blogging" on New Year's Eve, and his first post attracted wide attention from fellow Kazakhstani bloggers. With the hope that the blog provides the "end user interested in the doings of the Government and the socio-economic situation" with interesting, useful information, Masimov announced that "in the future, the blog will be filled with practically all necessary information."

¶3. Masimov asked his readers and fellow bloggers to leave comments which he promised to read in full. A number of people responded; at last count, the first post has received almost three hundred comments. The contributions ranged from wishes of wellness to questions about the status of the economy and complaints about the quality of tap water in villages. Masimov has since ordered the cabinet to investigate the criticisms, Reuters reported. One topic that received specific attention was the case of LiveJournal, a popular blogging platform which has reportedly been blocked in Kazakhstan. A number of readers asked why it has been blocked, when the blockage would be lifted, and what the Prime Minister himself (as a fellow blogger) intends to do about it.

¶4. The blog launch certainly generated a buzz and won approval among Internet users in Kazakhstan. Obviously happy with this step, Masimov told his ministers on January 12 to start their own personal blogs to get closer to the people. "I have opened a blog on the government website," Masimov told a government meeting, "so I order all ministers to start personal blogs where people will be able to ask you questions that you must answer."

"INTELLECTUAL SCHOOL" OPENED TO EDUCATE FUTURE ELITE

¶5. On January 12, President Nursultan Nazarbayev officially opened a new school for gifted children in Astana. As part of the President's project, "20 Intellectual Schools of the First President", 19 other schools are soon to follow in all Kazakhstani major cities. The government allocated 5 billion tenge (approximately \$42 million) from the 2009-10 budget to fund the

project. Astana's first "intellectual school" will focus on natural sciences and will provide an education to 1,200 students. Each of these students will be provided with a laptop computer and access to a broadband wireless network. Moreover, the school will have its own online education portal through which parents will be able to check on their children's progress and participate in the educational process.

¶16. According to preliminary information, the government will foot part of the bill, while the rest will be paid by the parents of the "young intellectuals." The schools are to provide an experimental platform to test new learning programs and modern educational technologies. "We are confident that the best children in all of Kazakhstan showing exceptional talent in these fields (i.e., mathematics and physics) will find themselves in these schools, in which we will raise the future elite of our country," Nazarbayev said at the opening ceremony.

COURT BRIBES MOST EXPENSIVE, SURVEY FINDS

¶17. In a survey conducted by the Association of Political and Social Scientists (APSS), 71.7 percent of respondents reported that they were at least one time involved in corruption during the last three months of 2008, Interfax reported. Courts topped the list as requiring the most expensive bribes (an average bribe of nearly \$3,746), followed by military enlistment offices (\$1,591). The average bribe for purchasing and registering land was \$1,415, and for employment and career advancement \$776. The survey showed that people consider customs and police to be the most corrupt government agencies. The courts, education and healthcare institutions, and procurator's offices do not fare much better in the survey.

GOVERNMENT APPARENTLY READY TO DITCH "TALON" SYSTEM

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¶18. Several years ago, ostensibly in response to the increasing number of traffic violations, Kazakhstan's lawmakers came up with an idea to force greater accountability on the part of the local drivers. In addition to their driver's licenses, each driver would be issued a card called a "talon" (which can be translated as "voucher") with an electronic chip that would store a driver's traffic violation history. The traffic police would then be equipped with mobile terminals to read the information stored on the talons. In fact, drivers would even have the option to deposit a balance on their talons and use them to pay their fines electronically at the scene of a violation. A local company called Kazakhstan Processing Center was selected, without a bidding process, to produce the talons and distribute them among the driving population. The deadline for introduction of the talon system was set for January 1, 2009.

¶19. "Talonization", as the process has been dubbed in the local media, has received considerable attention among the public, most of it negative. Questions focused mostly on the opaqueness of the entire process. Why does one need to introduce a card with information almost identical to already existing driver's licenses? Why is the entire process, including the management of the personal information of millions of citizens, to be controlled by a virtually unknown business entity?

¶10. Critics did not have to wait long to be justified in their skepticism. Kazakhstan Processing Center, which was supposed to issue the talons, showed itself not up to the task. As requests for talons started coming in, the backlog grew, and as early as the summer of 2008, when only about 10 percent of all drivers turned in their applications, the wait time was several months to receive a talon. Questions about how the company would be able to handle the expected rush leading up to the deadline of January 1, 2009, became more pressing. A "solution" came from Kazakhstan Processing Center itself, which announced that due to the high demand, talons would be sold for 1,200 tenge (approximately \$10). Only after thousands of drivers had paid did the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) finally insist that all talons had to be issued for free. Kazakhstan Processing Center itself never removed the price information from its website, despite promises that it would return money it received

for the talons.

¶11. However, with the deadline fast approaching, it became clear that the company would be unable to provide all drivers with their talons in time. At first, the MVD took a hard stance and announced that every driver would be required to have a talon by New Year's Day 2009 and would be fined if they did not obtain one. Later, the MVD softened its tone, and suggested a six-month transition period when drivers would only be warned and asked to get their talons. Soon rumors began to spread that the entire talon system would be brought to an end before it even took effect. It finally appears that the "talonization" idea will be put out of its misery.

Purportedly relying on high-ranking MVD sources, Mazhilis (parliament) member Sat Topkapbayev announced on January 14 that talons would, in fact, be abolished. An official MVD announcement has yet to be made, but it seems that the majority of Kazakhstanis, already used to similar schemes, chose the right strategy to wait out the talon.

BALLET DANCERS ON STRIKE

¶12. Ballet dancers from the National Opera and Ballet Theater in Astana protested their poor living conditions and miserable salaries by canceling a January 9 performance. Most of the 60 dancers live in dormitories, four to five per room, though some of them have spouses and children. The dancers, who were invited to join the theatre when it was started nine years ago, were promised apartments in Astana. Since then, only one of them was able to secure an apartment, and recently the theater management announced that no apartments will be given out. With salaries of around 50,000 tenge (approximately \$420) a month, the dancers find that buying apartments in Astana with their own financial resources is out of the question. The theater has national status, and thus falls under the competency of the Ministry of Information and Culture. Therefore, the Astana akimat (mayor's office) does not provide housing to the theater's employees as it does to the employees of municipal theaters.

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